

# Challenges of Technology, Social Media, and Information Control

*Technology in the classroom can be valuable, but not without challenges. The key is well-thought-out policies.*

By Bill Flaherty



Over and again, we must decide whether we want to allow someone into our circle of online friends. Do we want to share our daily lives with this person or that person? Have we considered the upside and downside of letting someone know details of our lives? These questions are difficult for anyone to answer—especially younger adolescents and teenagers.

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Think back to when we were in school. Managing our social network was difficult enough when the primary means of communication were face-to-face encounters, phone conversations, and covert notes passed under the desk or shoved in lockers. Today's youth must deal with friend management 24 hours a day, seven days a week. One thoughtless session at the keyboard late at night in the confines of one's room can have devastating effects. Any post can live in cyberspace for eternity.

## **The Trouble with Teenagers**

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center reported that 31% of teens ages 14–17 have a smartphone. Ninety-one percent of those young people access social media sites, and they are unlikely sitting at computers when they communicate electronically. The smartphone is their device of choice and they are never without it.

This easy accessibility combined with smartphones' many features, such as GPS, text, camera, and Internet access, can equal trouble. Smartphones and specialized apps make it easy to take a picture, click a button in the app, and send the image on its way instantly.

One of the most popular photo apps for teenagers—and adults, it seems—is Instagram, which boasts more than 100 million users, including celebrities, which keeps

“**T**o be, or not to be: that is the question.” Little did Shakespeare realize when he penned those words in the early 17th century that they could be altered slightly and still be relevant today—“To befriend, or not to befriend: that is the question.” And that can be a life or death question in this new world of social networking.

it in the news regularly. The user can take a picture, enhance it, and send it out into the world in a matter of seconds. Pictures can be shared instantly on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites. Each “share” creates a greater risk of the photo’s being in cyberspace forever.

Another photo app, Snapchat, is popular because the user can send a picture to a friend and control how long the picture is available. Supposedly, the user controls how long the picture lives on the Internet. However, anyone who receives an invitation to view the picture can do a simple screen capture. The company will alert the sender, but by then it is too late.

## Information Control

School districts can’t completely control how students use their smartphones and other technology outside school hours, but they can do everything possible to limit their use while students are on campus.

The Children’s Internet Protection Act was signed into law in 2000. Early the following year, the Federal Communications Commission issued rules for implementing CIPA and provided updates to those rules in 2011. Schools may not receive discounts under the E-Rate program unless they comply with those FCC rules.

One requirement is the establishment of an Internet safety policy that includes technology protection measures—filters that prevent students from viewing material that is obscene or harmful to minors. The Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act added a component to CIPA requiring schools that receive E-Rate and other technology funds to have an educational component in place that teaches students appropriate online behavior, including showing students how to interact with other individuals on social networking websites and in chat rooms and teaching them about cyberbullying.

Several proposals have come before Congress that would require schools to block student access to sites like Facebook and MySpace. Even without a congressional mandate, many schools block social networking sites, preventing students and teachers from accessing them while on school property. Other schools, recognizing the power—and draw—of smartphones and social networking, are looking for ways to use those “tools” to engage students in learning.

## And Then There’s Facebook

School districts do recognize the power of social networking as a communications and public relations tool. Aside from keeping students off Facebook while in school, they have some unique challenges with the social networking site that have nothing to do with students.

Many school districts have Facebook pages to keep the public informed about what’s going on in the district. Individual schools establish Facebook pages that

## BYOD and Internet Access

**B**YOD (bring your own device) is a movement that is spreading in schools throughout the nation. Because so many students have their own smartphones and tablets these days, districts allow them in the classrooms. It is a cost-effective way to provide more technology in the classroom without the expense of new equipment.

When students attach their devices to the network, their access is filtered as though their devices were pieces of school equipment. The challenge for teachers is that smartphones and many iPads and tablets have wireless Internet access through commercial service providers.

Despite the Federal Communications Commission provision requiring schools to take measures to block and filter the Internet and school board policies stating that students must use the school network with the BYOD program, it is almost impossible to monitor every student in the class to ensure that he or she is on the school network. When students switch to their “own” networks, they have access to all their favorite social networking sites, along with the rest of the Internet.

The practical question is, “How much instructional time is consumed by teachers being cybercops?”

are unrelated to the district’s Facebook pages, however. And in many cases, the principal is not the administrator of the school’s site, having delegated the responsibility for maintaining the Facebook page to a staff member or to the Parent-Teacher Association. When schools act independently, a school district has difficulty putting forth a consistent message. Is the organization a school district or a district of schools?

## Is the organization a school district or a district of schools?

A smart district communications plan addresses the use of Facebook at both the district and school levels. Many districts require schools to provide central-office personnel with log-ins and passwords for their Facebook accounts. That way, someone at the district level can log in and change a school’s Facebook page if information on the page is inaccurate or harmful to the district or its students. Districts also benefit from having access to all accounts so they can ensure that there are no “dead” Facebook pages—pages that are not regularly updated and maintained. This situation happens when the person who is responsible for the Facebook account leaves and no one else knows the password.



Go a bit deeper and you will find Facebook pages established by student groups, such as a student council, honor society, or extracurricular club. Schools and districts should ensure that those pages, while oftentimes maintained by students, are monitored by someone at the school leadership level, be that the adviser and assistant principal, or principal.

## Twitter provides an entirely new paradigm for communication.

Ideally, all Facebook pages associated with a school district—be they club pages, Parent-Teacher Association pages, or school pages—should be monitored to ensure that they present the organization in a positive light. Edutopia released “How to Create Social Media Guidelines for Your School,” a free guide produced in collaboration with Facebook ([www.edutopia.org/how-to-create-social-media-guidelines-school](http://www.edutopia.org/how-to-create-social-media-guidelines-school)).

A much thornier issue for a school district involves individual school board members who create their own Facebook pages so they can share their personal feelings about the hot topics of the day. Such sites can be divisive

for the school board and the district as a whole. Often, individual school board members scoop the district by posting information on their Facebook pages before the district website can be updated. Or they express views contrary to those put forth by the district.

### What's to Come?

Facebook stock is down from its initial offering. Google+, the social networking offering from Google, is surging in popularity. Instagram was almost unknown a year ago. Twitter provides an entirely new paradigm for communication—you can say anything you want in 144 characters or fewer.

The hot app or site for social networking may change from year to year or even month to month. The tool we use to communicate in cyberspace may change, but one thing is for sure, social networking has changed our lives and the lives of our children and it is not going away.

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